

Status of Women in Indian Society: A Historical Perspective

Dr. Vinod Kumar¹

¹ Sociology, Vallabh Government College, Mandi Himachal Pradesh 175001, India

Correspondence: Dr. Vinod Kumar, Sociology, Vallabh Government College, Mandi Himachal Pradesh 175001, India.

doi:10.56397/JRSSH.2024.04.07

Abstract

Status is a social position one occupies in a society with its associated advantages and obligations. Being a part of the social web, this position is linked naturally to other social positions. In a purely sociological sense, status does not imply any grading, ranking or hierarchy among different social positions. However, the very fact that a particular social position carries certain benefits, privileges or power and these positions are related to each other, some status positions are seen as superior to others. It is in this context that the status or position of women is seen as inferior to that of men in any given society. Each or status position is expressed in terms of a Role. Role denotes a set of expectations and obligations associated with a particular status position within a group or social situation. The expectations and obligations entailed by a role are in terms of activities and qualities. (GOI, CSWI, 1974) In short, while status defines who a person is, role defines what such a person is expected to do. In this research paper discuss the status of Women in Indian Society a Historical Perspective.

Keywords: status, role, power, education, property, prestige and privileges

1. Introduction

Each individual occupies more than one social position or status within a society. Therefore, he/she performs a variety of roles. Performance of multiple roles in varied social situations often leads to changes in role perception of individuals. A woman performs a number of roles — role of a wife, housewife (homemaker), and a mother, daughter or a sister. She may also be a teacher, manager, factory worker or a farmer. In some cases (female-headed households), she may also be the head of the family. Her status is not determined by any one of these, but by a composite of all of these taken

together. Some of these may be in conflict or incompatible with each other, creating confusion, strain and ambiguity. The actions, rewards or rights, which women in these positions expect from others and the perception of the actual rewards accompanying these positions, constitute their status in the society. For identifying the women's status, therefore, both the 'subjective' (women's experiential awareness of objective benefits) and 'objective' (income, education, property, prestige and privileges, choices available and power) dimensions of status need to be taken into account.

How the social positions or status of women and

men are juxtaposed and perceived in any society at a given point of time determines the relative values or importance ascribed to their assigned roles. This is what decides the power, privileges or advantages she will be allowed to enjoy vis-à-vis men.

That women's status has consistently been subordinate to that of men in India as elsewhere has been accepted for quite sometime now. Patriarchy and religion have generally been held to be the main culprits for creating this situation. While these two forces played a very significant role and influenced all other factors, the low social status accorded to women is the result also of political, economic, legal and educational and other social determinants.

2. Indian Women's Status Through the Ages

Discussion about women's status, therefore, involves looking at what position they have held in any given society at a given point of time. It varies across place and time because their position is determined by existing social structure and social relationships. Social structure, constituting of patterns of social relationships, is not static and manifests itself in the social change process in any society.

Looking at Indian women's status in a historical perspective helps us to probe deeply and understand the reasons and process of the phenomenon of women's subordinate status and devaluation of their roles, duties and tasks as compared to those of men, their deprivation and exploitation. It impels us to acknowledge the role of social, religious and cultural sanctions providing legitimacy to this process — the process, which started in the distant past, and passing through the ages, clamors for our attention even today. Dropping away a feeling of despondence and anger, we finally need to look at the efforts made to improve women's status in India to arrive at some fair assessment of their present status.

Right at the onset of this venture, let us be clear about some basic constraints we have to encounter:

- 1) This history goes back to about four thousand years. Documentary evidence of this history is extremely inadequate and the authenticity of whatever is available is debatable.
- 2) The historians have so far been men and portrayal of women and their concerns have been made from a male perspective.

- 3) The exploitation and subjugation of women were not only idealized and justified, but also women, having internalized their position of inferiority, themselves became the most zealous carrier and perpetrators of the culture and traditions responsible for their conditions.

- 4) Women, we are talking about, are not a homogenous social group. The disabilities, women have been exposed to in the past, or even today, have not affected all women in the same way and to the same extent; not did all inequalities apply to all women. For example, "the lack of employment applied only to middle-class women, as the peasant women were occupied in the agricultural activity along with their men folk and the women of the higher class hardly had any wish or necessity to take employment." (Gupta, 1982:154). The women are divided across caste, class, religion, region and community they belong to.

- 5) As a result, the disabling social situations and the subsequent efforts to ameliorate the same have impacted women differently.

- 6) The 'objectively' high status need not necessarily coincide with 'subjectively' high status experience. Also, an overall high status does not necessarily imply a high status in all spheres.

- 7) For a variety of reasons, the present paper does not claim adequate coverage of status issues of women belonging to different religious communities and regions.

The Vedic Age is supposed to be the golden era of women's status in India. Although 'It would be too simplistic to merely accept that in the distant past ... all was well with women in Indian Society. (All we can say is that) They may have enjoyed greater freedom of movement and a greater share in important social and religious functions (de Souza, 1980:187). On the basis of available Vedic literature, we can say, however, that women were treated much better and enjoyed more rights than they did in later times.

The earliest Vedic literature, Rigveda, which is claimed to have evolved roughly from 1500 BC to 1000 BC, shows clear influence of the pre Aryan culture in its references to the image of 'Mother Goddess' or Shakti, giving reverence to the beneficial aspect of nature and women. In the later Vedic literature, there are indications that the principle of patriarchy got strengthened. The birth of a son was decidedly a matter of great joy, but the birth of a daughter was not

seen as a matter of misfortune. Various important ceremonies like 'annaprasana', 'namkaran', 'jatkaram', 'upnayan', as well as 'yajnyyopoavit' were held both for girls and boys, making it clear that there was no difference between children of different sexes. Women, further, had full access to education evidenced by references to women like Gargi, Maitreyi, and Aditi. The number of mantras whose creation is attributed to women scholars testifies their proficiency in the knowledge of mantras. (Seth, 2001:17) It is an interesting reflection on women's status in the Vedic age that women could remain unmarried and remain Brahnavadinis, devoted to the pursuit of knowledge or marry. Women had freedom to choose their own life partners. The age of marriage was higher, that is, after brahmacharya. Women had important place in the performance of rituals, yajnas and other religious ceremonies. Both men and women took vows at the time of marriage to look after each other and perform their respective roles to strengthen the family. However, being a patriarchal society, mothers of sons had a special status in society. While marriage was considered a noble institution, divorce was permitted in specific conditions and remarriage of divorced women called punarbhu (with children or childless) has been referred to in various texts (Datta, 2000:8). Monogamy seems to be the rule rather than an exception. Indications also exist of the practice of niyoga through which a childless mother, married or widowed, could have a child by a man other than her husband. Women not only participated in rituals and religious activities, they were experts in martial arts, veterinary sciences and the use of the handloom. It is important to note that the accounts of women's situation during the Vedic period offer a view only of women of the Brahmin caste. There is hardly any mention of women of other social groups.

Latter part of Vedic Period witnessed increasing rigidity in Hindu Society. The society gradually established itself as patriarchal, controlling every aspect of women's existence. As society became stratified, women's roles were defined as subservient to men in the name of social and moral stability. Confined within an elaborate structuring of power relations and ethical principles, women's lives from about 500 BC became more patrifocal, constricted and homebound (Bose, 2000:viii).

3. The Buddhist Era

In the 6th century BC, the teachings and practices of the Vedas were thrown into the background. There was much priest craft everywhere. The insincere priests traded on religion. They duped the people in a variety of ways and amassed wealth for themselves. In the name of religion, people followed in the footsteps of the cruel priests and performed meaningless rituals (Swami Sivananda).

Buddha's teachings had a revolutionary impact on women's status, as in many other aspects of Hindu social and religious life. He preached to all without exception, men and women, the high and the low, the ignorant and the learned — all alike. All his first disciples were laymen and two of the very first were women. This had a liberating influence on women. Buddha established an order of female ascetics (nuns) as also of male sanyasins (monks). Many women, oppressed in their families, found solace in the Nunneries. Women's contributions to Buddhist literature give evidence of their access to education. Although the status of husband was superior to his wife, the relationship was of mutual respect. Age at marriage was higher and the birth of the daughter was not considered a calamity.

During the lifetime of the Buddha and later, the patriarchy had got strongly entrenched in the society. After the Buddha expired, the Order of the Buddhist Monks and Nuns interpreted his teachings in such a manner as to make them acceptable to the social order of the day. In spite of allowing women equal participation in the practice of the Path and Nirvana, many jatak stories claim that the Buddha had a very low view of women's capabilities. Women were acknowledged to be temptresses; and nuns came to be subjugated to the monks. Despite the egalitarian teachings of the Buddha, the later Buddhist teachers perceived women as physically weak and dependent. Despite intellectual parity, woman was definitely considered as inferior to man in monastery as well as in society. In fact, Buddhism leaves most areas of worldly life to be managed by the people according to their customs and traditions (GOI, CSWI, 1974:48).

During the Puranic, Epic and later (known as the Post Vedic period), women suffered a severe slide in their social position in society. The post Vedic period is characterized by a strong

ambivalence towards women. Women were visualized both as goddesses or shakti—to be worshiped and temptress to be shunned at the same time. The great epics put mothers of sons and faithful wives on a very high pedestal. The chaste and faithful wives were shown to have developed miraculous powers. Except in the form of deities or mothers, women were seldom seen equal to men. A very important influence on the status of (Hindu) women has been the Manusmriti, a book composed by Manu somewhere from 200 BC to 200 AD and committed to writing in 12th century AD (Seth 2001:23). With an apparent goal of solidifying family as a social institution, Manu established the principle of purity as a basis of a code of social conduct. Women were seen as the most potential danger to purity of the family lineage. They were, therefore, restricted to the four walls of their home. Religious prescriptions and social practices reinforced each other to relegate women to secondary status.

The outcome of this perception of women was denial of education to women—denial to read Vedas or chant mantras. The role of a married woman was confined to her home and to serve her husband faithfully. She could attain her salvation through selfless service to her husband, taking care of his daily needs, so that he could meditate and perform Vedic rites. Manu, who is held responsible for the fate women suffered for more than two millennia, considered women in constant need of protection and supervision.

As a result, gradually, early or child marriages came to become a norm. On account of the preference for a son to carry on the lineage and the problems of protecting girls, female infanticide became prevalent in India. Pativrata wife could not imagine getting linked to any other man and hence, if the husband died, she was expected to opt for self immolation. Sati got a status equal to that of deities. Woman's sins were responsible for her husband's death and so, widows were considered inauspicious. Marriage being sacrosanct, divorce was not only unthinkable, but also despicable. While Manu acknowledged the Vedic text's action of divorce under certain conditions, he himself did not approve divorce under any condition. Women were, therefore, often trapped in incompatible marriage with unsuitable, cruel or mentally ill husband for life. Women were engaged in an elaborate regime of Vratas observed for the

welfare of their husbands or sons. Due to complete subjugation of women, they had no right to property or inheritance. Rather, they themselves were considered a commodity 'owned' by their husbands.

Right through the **Muslim and Mughal rule**, these social practices got firmly entrenched in Indian social fabric. The threat of Muslim invaders pushed women further in isolation and misery. Although Islam was basically more egalitarian in its philosophy than many other religions, it gradually adopted a social milieu where women were secluded. This seclusion was symbolized by the practice of purdah, which became synonymous with respectability and status. The outcome of this state of affairs was restricted mobility and domesticity the only vocation in life. By a misinterpretation of the Holy Book, Quaran, or reading the text out of its original context, the sanction of polygamy, particularly among the upper classes led to the devaluation of women's position in society. Women were denied the reading of the Islamic scriptures and the advantages of education. The economic position of the Mughal royal women was very powerful and they engaged in charity as well as patronized arts like music and dance. The women of middle and lower classes had a tougher time. They married young, had many children, and worked as domestic servants of the rich. The poor were mostly illiterate. Foreign travelers to the country mentioned many instances of Sati among the higher-class Hindu women (Seth, 2001:28-31).

The Bhakti Movement, led by the Saint reformers like Kabir, Ravidas and Nanak during this period, once more attempted to bring women and men, people of all castes and classes or religion at one platform. They preached equality among all human beings because of the divine spark within them. The movement released women from the disability in the area of religion. Devotion to God precluded the need for knowledge of scriptures. Women achieved a sense of personhood in the eyes of the Supreme Being. However, as the Saints were concerned more with salvation of individual souls than with social reform, the impact of their teachings got diluted after they were no longer physically present.

At the advent of the **British in India**, the status of women had reached its nadir—the lowest pit. Women were ignorant and illiterate; were bound by innumerable rituals and fasts; married early

and were treated as property and the most menial servant of the husband. Widowhood was a curse, and carried with it a most miserable life. Remarriage of widows was an unthinkable crime. Sati, often, was chosen, by the family and women themselves, as an option to escape this lot. Parents killed their female infants to save themselves and their daughters the cruel life awaiting them. Confined to the four walls of home and strict observance of Purdah, women's role was limited to the domestic duties. Their work in the family was considered unproductive and, therefore, completely devalued. This was mostly the situation of women of upper castes. Women from lower castes had their own problems. They were not as restricted as women of upper castes, as they had to work on the fields or in the households of the rich upper caste families, but all, including the husbands, treated them as slaves without any rights or dignity.

It was in this scenario that the **Indian social reformers of the 19th century** took up the task of improving women's deplorable condition. Starting with Raja Ram Mohan Roy, many upper caste, English educated men in Bengal and Maharashtra and later in the South made women's issues the focus of the reform movement during the early British period. Influenced by the western education, they tried to bring out the fact that scriptures did not support subjugation of women. Their social status induced the neutral British government to enact laws to ban Sati and raise the age at marriage (Age of Consent Bill). Many schools were opened for girls; widow homes were established to give shelter and protection to widows and a number of reformers supported remarriage of widows. Similar reform movements were initiated in other religious affiliations, communities and regions. **Muslim reformers** like Sir Syed Ahmed Khan advocated women's education. The education for girls in the 19th century was traditional in the sense that it centered around the sacred literature. Muslim girls were expected to learn the Quran and some accounting skills. However, the strict seclusion observed by upper class families prohibited their daughters from attending schools. Baduddin Tayabji campaigned against the purdah system. A few Muslims, namely Begum Abdullah and Amina Tayabji started girl's schools. Some journals were published in Urdu to spread religious education and also made a case for social and educational reforms of

Muslim women, particularly of the middle class women in purdah. The need to reform and simplify custom, to educate women in housekeeping and child care were acknowledged. One such journal, "Beheshti Zevar" claimed to offer whole knowledge necessary for women — alphabets, letter-writing, simple religious duties, the stories of prophets and practical advice in cooking, caring of the sick and domestic manners" (Firdaus, 2001:31).

The Emphasis, thus, was on providing "a role model' of educated women as competent managers of the domestic realm, helpmates to their husbands and nurturer of the young and on a need for women to know the scriptures, their rights and duties in Islam and to discern useless customs and superstitious from true religion" (Gail Minault, quoted by Firdaus, 2001:33).

The Second phase of this reform movement saw the emergence of leadership among women themselves. Women like Pandita Rama Bai and Ramabai Ranade started widow sadans and girl's schools and spoke openly against evil social practices affecting women. The establishment of the Women's Indian Association in 1917 in the South and All India Women's Conference (AIWC) in 1927 in the North, was the first organised attempt by women to look after women's issues related to education, marriage and family and voting rights. The organisations grew speedily. The fast awakening women trooped into it (AIWC) like 'young recruits'.

Being elitist in nature, the impact of various reform movements reached only the upper and middle castes, and more so in the urban areas. It remained for Mahatma Gandhi's nationalist freedom movement to reach the masses and achieve social transformation. Women's large-scale participation in the freedom struggle was facilitated by two major factors: use of non-violence and self-sacrifice and the metaphor of Mother India applied to all women. It invoked women's existing image of a mother sacrificing all for the family — in this case, the large family being the whole of India. Women's projected qualities of tenderness and self-sacrifice silenced all objections of their immediate families. Women participated in all spheres of the Movement — whether from within the home environs or out on the streets. The agenda of the National Congress included equality and dignity for women. The Nationalist

Movement brought to the surface the significance of women's roles and contributions as also the various forms of exploitation and discriminations they had to suffer. This greatly facilitated women's issues and concerns to get into focus and got reflected in our Constitution after Independence.

We now come to the period after independence and adoption of our Constitution that enshrines the dreams and aspirations of Indian people and the image of an ideal society where every one is considered equal, irrespective of religion, caste, or gender. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted about that time also influenced the Constitution. The period after the Independence is marked by a number of efforts undertaken both by the Government and the Voluntary sector to uplift women's status.

The concern in safeguarding the rights and privileges of women found its best expression in our Constitution. It removed discrimination against women in both legal and public domain. Fundamental Rights in the Constitution ensured that women would not face discrimination on account of their sex. The State, however, was empowered to make affirmative discrimination in favor of women due to the suppression faced by them for centuries. Directive Principles of State Policy enjoined upon the state to ensure safe and humane conditions of work for women. Article 51 A (e) imposed a Fundamental duty on every citizen not to indulge in practices derogatory to the dignity of women.

Constitutional Safeguards were translated into practice by enacting several legislations covering wide spectrum of women's life. "The large participation of women in the freedom struggle and the progressive ideas pushed forward by the social reformers in the 19th century led to a flurry of legislative activities during the 1950s, benefiting particularly The Hindu women" (Agrawal & Rao, 2004:26). These include the Hindu Marriage Act 1955, The Hindu Succession Act 1956 and The Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, 1956. Laws have been passed to legalize abortion, to raise age at marriage and to settle family disputes. The laws have also been passed to combat social evils like Dowry, Sati, Rape, indecent representation of women, female infanticide, etc. Many of the Directive Principles have already become laws, like The Maternity Benefit Act and Equal Pay for Equal Work. Although there are numerous laws governing employment, wages, working

conditions, social security, welfare and other aspects of labour, not many relate exclusively to women. Some acts were enacted keeping the spirit of Personal Laws of other religious communities in mind.

The main thrust of development efforts in post independent India has been reflected in the Five-year Plans. The approaches of looking at problems and needs of women and identifying strategies to help women grow and develop have changed over time. The change has been in terms of emphasize, organizational infrastructure and the goals of strategies adopted. The development policies have reflected a transition of approaches to deal with women's concerns: from 'welfare' approach (first to fifth plans) to 'development' (sixth to eighth plans) and finally to empowerment (ninth and tenth plans).

4. Welfare Approach

In the 1950s and early 1960s, resources were directed primarily to market oriented productive activities and the residual welfare assistance was directed to vulnerable groups of which women formed an important segment. Programmes on nutrition, home economics and child welfare sought to reinforce women's role as mothers, wives and homemakers. They were seen as primarily responsible for the well being of the family with little recognition to their role in productive development activities. This approach was based on the western stereotype of the nuclear family in which women are economically dependent on the male breadwinners. Women were passive recipients of welfare services. It was presumed that the developmental benefits would automatically accrue to the women as a result of economic development of the family. Family was recognized as a basic unit for receiving welfare benefits. Much of the responsibility of providing services to the vast female population was left to the voluntary sector. During early 60s, issues of women worker's organization and their working conditions were recognized. The Third, Fourth and the Fifth Plans paid some attention to the condition of the girl child — her education, health and nutritional needs.

Women in Development (WID): In the early 1970s, the women in development (WID) concept emerged. The philosophy underlying this approach is that women are lagging behind in society, and the gap between men and women

can be bridged by remedial measures within the existing structures. The WID approach started to recognize women as direct actors of social, political, cultural and working life. It recognizes women in development by improving their access to resources and benefits. As the mainstream development agenda in the 1970s focused on poverty and basic needs, it was possible to demonstrate that women were predominantly represented in the ranks of the poorest of the poor and were largely responsible for meeting the basic needs of their family. The critical significance of women's contribution in any effort to maximize returns to development investments was increasingly emphasized (Sharma, 2004-220). The Anti Poverty Approach recognized women's productive role and ensured that poor women increase productivity. Women were organized into groups. Community based income generation activities were encouraged.

5. Development (Equity Approach)

The Report of the Commission on the Status of Women in India in 1974 stated that despite developmental policies and governmental efforts, the condition of women continued to be deplorable; their status in society was very low: and they suffered various forms of discriminations and exploitation. Drawing inspiration from this Report, the representations from the women's organizations and the guidelines provided by the UN World Plan of Action, the Sixth Plan (1980-85) carried an independent chapter on 'Women and Development'. The chapter expressed concern about declining sex ratio, lower life expectancy among women and continued low status of women in society. They recognized women as vital human resources whose development was expected to contribute significantly to overall National Development. Women were no longer viewed as targets of welfare policies in social sector. The plan adopted a multidisciplinary approach with a three-pronged thrust on core sectors of health, education and employment. Improving women's access to training and employment became the focus of the new approach. Most of the women's issues were handed over to the newly formed Ministry of 'Human Resource Development'. Central Social Welfare Board came within the newly constituted Ministry. Through the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP), Development of Women and Children in Rural

Areas (DWCRA), Training Rural Youth for Self-employment (TRYSEM), which were started under the Anti-Poverty Approach, and Women's Development Corporations, efforts were made to promote self-employment among women, particularly from weaker sections of society, through training, credit through micro finance, marketing support, etc. through organized groups of women. The focus of this approach was redistribution (of resources) with growth.

The Seventh Plan (1985-90) emphasized an integrated approach to deal with women's development, covering women's concerns like education, health, nutrition, training and employment, awareness generation and confidence building. Full fledged Department of Women and Child Development within the Ministry of Human Resource Development became the nodal agency to integrate women's related schemes in different sectors like Educations, Health, Industry, Labour and Science & Technology.

Participatory Approach: The basic thrust of The Eight Plan (1992-97) was on the organization and strengthening of women's groups at the grass-root level, so that they could play a decisive role in the planning and implementation of various developmental programmes, rather than remain only the recipient of the same. The Plan recognized the devaluation of women's work, mostly in the informal sector, and emphasized the need to secure "greater societal awareness of their contribution to national well being" (GOI, the Eighth Five Year Plan). Besides setting up of the National Commission of Women to safeguard women's empowerment through Self-Help Groups (SHGs), the most far-reaching development during this period is the enactment of 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts, leading to large scale participation of women in the affairs of the local bodies.

Gender and Development (GAD): In the 1980s, the Gender and Development approach emerged as a result of WID and its shortcomings, concentrating on the unequal relations analytical tool from an increasing awareness of inequalities due to institutional structures. After about 30 years of WID approach, the sluggish rate of change in women's material condition led to the conclusion that lesser power in social relations, which is institutionalized in gender relations (as

well as in class and race relations), was inhibiting their capacity to profit from improved access to social and economic resources (Aga Khan Foundation, 2001:101).

6. Empowerment Approach

Another approach, which together with GAD has shaped the Ninth and finally the Tenth Plan, is empowerment. Empowerment implies the process of enabling sections of people deprived of their right to have a 'level playing ground with the privileged'. True empowerment comes when the affected people themselves feel empowered. Besides economic, political, or legal components of empowerment, development of a positive attitude towards self, higher levels of self-esteem and self-confidence among women are essential ingredients of the process of empowerment (Agrawal & Rao, 2004: xiv). The process of empowerment also implies enabling an individual (in this case women) to make her own choices. Indiresan (2001) defines empowerment as "a process that helps people gain control of their lives through raising awareness, taking action and working in order to exercise greater control." {Quoted by Agrawal & Rao, 2004: 195}

The Ninth Plan (1997-2002) committed itself to empower women as agents of social change and development. It adopted the National Policy for Empowerment of Women (2001) with a view to creating an enabling environment for women to exercise their rights both within and outside home, as equal partners along with men. The Ninth Plan took the first real step to ensure the flow of adequate development funds for the benefit of women. The Plan directed both the Centre and the states to adopt a special strategy of "women's components Plan" through which, not less than 30% of funds/benefits should be earmarked for all the women-related sector. (Deptt. of Women and Child Development, Annual Report, 2002-03). The National Policy for the Empowerment of Women also envisaged introduction of a gender perspective in the budgeting process as an operational strategy. (GOI, Deptt of Women and Child Development, Annual Report, 2002-03) But the Ninth Plan did not make any commitment for achieving any specific goal or target. The change and development was not spelt out in specific terms.

The Tenth Plan (2002-07), for the first time, fixed certain measurable targets in the social, economic and environment sectors to be

achieved during the plan period (GOI, Annual Report, 2002-03). Out of 15 such targets, at least four are related to women and children. These are a) reduction of gender gaps in literacy and wage rates by at least 50%; b) reduction of infant mortality rate to 45 per 1000 live births; c) reduction of maternal mortality ratio to two per 1000 live births; and d) all children to complete five years of schooling by 2007. Four more targets are related to women indirectly, that is, related to poverty reduction, reduction in population growth, increase in literacy rates and access to potable drinking water in all the villages. It is proposed that a sector-specific three-fold strategy based on the prescriptions of the National Policy, comprising of social empowerment, economic empowerment and gender justice, be followed. Social empowerment aims at creating "an enabling environment through various affirmative developmental policies and programmes of development of women besides providing them easy and equal access to all basic minimum services so as to enable them to realize their full potential" (GOI, The Tenth Five Year Plan). Economic empowerment would "ensure provision of training, employment and income-generating activities with the ultimate objective of making all potential women economically independent" (GOI, The Tenth Five Year Plan). Gender justice seeks to eliminate all forms of gender discrimination and enables women to enjoy fundamental rights and freedoms on equal footing with men.

7. The Women's Movement

One of the most significant influences in improving or focusing on women's concerns has been the women's movement. After the Independence, the women activists, who had been very active during the pre independence freedom struggle, went back home with a strong belief that all would be well for women in free India. The women leaders, as it is, believed that domestic duties were the real domain of women and that participation in political affairs were the need of the hour.

The Period from Independence till about the declaration of the International Women's Day in 1975 can be called dormant, where ideas of women's liberation remained, but no actual movement was manifest. Among the upper and middle class women, the trend was towards getting more education and to seek employment. These women became more and more conscious

of their individuality, sex discrimination and oppression. They formed groups out of which a 'second wave' began to remerge. The publication of a women's magazine, 'Manushi' in 1979 in Delhi, according to them, heralded a second rising of the movement. At about the same time, the main political parties of India organized women's wings. Women activists these wings worked for women's concerns, but remained within the party's ideology.

The International Women's Year followed by the Women's Decade gave stimulus to a focused approach to the women's movement. Women's issues were not seen as those requiring merely relief, rescue or rehabilitation. The decade saw a mushroom growth of autonomous groups of women. Middle class students and young employees came together spontaneously to fight various forms of oppression. The birth of some of these took place in the face of the resurfacing and ever increasing sexual exploitation and violence, resulting in crimes against women like rape and bride burning due to dowry. They have focused on the modern variety of female infanticide (sex determination tests), practice of Sati, women's health issues, rape and finally, domestic violence. Women's organizations' slogan, 'personal is political', helped them bring those facets of women's oppression and exploitation to the surface, which so far belonged to the private domain of the family. They won quite a few battles on the legal front by getting new legislations passed or by getting old ones amended in the field of rape, dowry, inheritance, age at marriage, sati, divorce, amniocentesis against female foetus, etc. Large network of women's groups have been able to represent Indian women's concerns at national and international platforms.

Along with the task of creating awareness about women's issues, women's groups have highlighted the upsurge of the fundamentalist forces in the 1990s. They have braved the onslaught by twin forces of fundamentalism and economic liberalization on women's rights and dignity as an individual, whichever class, caste, region or religion the women might belong to. Women's groups have been an important factor in bringing out the role of vested interests in misinterpreting the scriptures of different religions in India. They have shown that all the religions, whether Hindu, Islam, or Christianity, originally preached a gospel of equality and egalitarian social relationships. The

interpretations of the scriptures and clinging to the outdated personal laws in the name of maintaining communal identities in secular state have resulted in strengthening the male dominance and trapping women into subordination. Women's press has been playing an active role in this regard.

8. Conclusion

"Indian women are at the crossroads of their destiny. There is a great upsurge in consciousness about their rights among all sections and classes of society in all regions of the country. There has been a tremendous increase in developmental activity for women since the eighties with a great leap forward in the 90s ... (But) there is the startling continuity in cultural norms ... Unfortunately, some of the gender biases of the predominant cultures are entering the tribal culture as seen in the increase in crime against women" (Seth, 2001: 256). The development in economic and some of the social spheres has not had corresponding impact on women's status within the family. Domestic violence, incest, continuing preference for a son over the birth of daughter (especially among the educated and/or relatively affluent families) put a big question mark on the claims of improvement in women's status in contemporary Indian Society. Legislations have had some effect on Hindu women in the areas of marriage, succession and inheritance. Muslim and Christian women's status continues to be governed by their customary laws. Muslim women cannot complain against polygamous marriages against their husbands nor expect any succor in case of divorce and the Christian customary law does not recognize a second marriage. The Hindu women also rarely invoke legal measures for protecting their rights. The social evil of dowry seems to be afflicting all communities alike. Although legal measures create an enabling atmosphere, they have not succeeded in giving greater empowerment. Increasing incidents of sexual harassments, indecent representations of women in the media dilute any gains we may claim in objective status dimensions. As long as any effort to give women a share in the family/community resources, allow life choices, participation in different decision making processes and ensuring just social relationships is perceived by men as a threat to their status, we cannot hope to establish a just and egalitarian society. Interventions to raise women's status need to be

presented from a win-win rather than a win-lose perspective.

References

- Aga Khan Foundation. (2001). *Understanding Women's Experience in Natural Resources Management*. Aga Khan Foundation, New Delhi.
- Agrawal, Rashmi & B.V.L.N. Rao. (2004). *Gender Issues: A Road Map to Empowerment*. Shipra Publications, Delhi.
- Bose, Mandakranta(ed). (2000). *Faces of the Feminine in Ancient, Medieval, and Modern India*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi.
- De Souza, Alfred. (1980). *Women in Contemporary India and South Asia*. Manohar Publications, 2nd edition, Delhi.
- Dutta, Krishna. (2000). *A Controversy over a Verse on the Remarriage of Hindu Women*. Mandakranta Bose, *Faces of the Feminine in Ancient, Medieval, and Modern India*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi.
- Firdaus, Zakia. (2001, July-September). Muslim Women's Up-liftment under the Nineteenth Century SocioCultural Paradigm. *Women's Link*, 7(3).
- Government of India, Department of Women and Child Development, Annual Report 2002-03, New Delhi.
- Government of India, Ministry of Education and Social Welfare, Department of Social Welfare, (1974). *Towards Equality: Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India*, New Delhi.
- Government of India, Planning Commission, The Eighth Five Year Plan.
- Government of India, Planning Commission, The Tenth Five Year Plan.
- Gupta, A.R. (1982). *Women in Hindu Society (A Study of Tradition and Transition)*. Jyotsna Prakashan, 2nd ed. New Delhi.
- Seth, Mira. (2001). *Women Development: The Indian Experience*. Sage Publications Inc, New Delhi.
- Sharma, Usha. (2004). *Gender Mainstreaming and Women's Rights*. Authors Press, Delhi.
- Sivananda, Swami. Lord Buddha, in *Lives of the Saints*, Divine Life Society.